DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 284 TM 027 684

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TITLE Negotiating Borders of Self and Other: Schools as Sites for the Construction of Identity.

PUB DATE 1997-06-00

NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Jean Piaget Society (27th, Santa Monica, CA, June 19-21, 1997).

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; *Child Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Individual Development; *Learning; *School Role

IDENTIFIERS *Identity Formation

ABSTRACT

Although the connections between learning and identity are acknowledged in most contexts (e.g., family, community, and workplace), these issues are oddly divorced in schools, a curious bifurcation given schools' developmental agenda. This situation is suggested to have emerged from a Western folk-view in which the cognitive act of learning is seen as distinct from the social and emotional aspects of identity making. However, since learning (or the failure to learn) always positions students socially, students' constructions of knowledge cannot be separated from their constructions of themselves as people. Accordingly, it is suggested that identity is more accurately understood as a quality of the coupling between a student and his or her school-based attempts to learn rather than as something irrelevant to learning, achieved or acquired by the student in other contexts. (Contains 1 figure and 24 references.) (Author/SLD)

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ED 414 284

Negotiating borders of self and other: Schools as sites for the construction of identity

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Paper presented at the 27th Annual Symposium of the
Jean Piaget Society
June 19-21, 1997
Santa Monica, California

ABSTRACT: This paper argues that although the connections between learning and identity are acknowledged in most contexts (e.g., family, community, and workplace) these issues are curiously divorced in schools, a curious bifurcation given schools' developmental agenda. This situation is suggested to have emerged from a Western folk-view in which the cognitive act of learning is seen as distinct from the social and emotional aspects of identity-making. However, since learning (or the failure to learn) always positions students socially, it is argued that students' construction of knowledge cannot be separated from their construction of themselves as people. Accordingly, it is suggested that identity is more accurately understood as a quality of the coupling between student and his or her school-based attempts to learn rather that as something irrelevant to learning, "achieved" or "acquired" by the student in other contexts.

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Negotiating borders of self and other: Schools as sites for the construction of identity

The term, *learning*, is typically used to refer to changes in ourselves which we attribute to experience, to our interactions with people, ideas, and objects. The term, *identity*, on the other hand, commonly describes the collection of presumably stable (more-or-less) personal qualities and characteristics by which we are recognized and made known to self and other. In english, to learn means to *do* something while the term "identity," a noun, means to *be* something. While we can distinguish these terms analytically, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which issues of learning and identity do not coincide, in which one's learning fails to have implications for who or what one is. One would never think of claiming, for example, that their identity as an individual is entirely separable from the various kinds of knowledge they possess. After all, it is only by virtue of such knowledge (or its lack) that we are positioned relative to those around us.

Let's look at some domains that make this explicit. First, in the family-of-origin, one learns many things we would all recognize as basic to identity: how to talk, work, argue, play, love, and so forth. Next, qualified by the "directive force" of our own personal and cultural backgrounds (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992, p. xi), we learn to negotiate the community's various ethnic and institutional cultures, a process synonymous with learning how to weave our identities into the larger society. Finally, in the workplace, our identity as workers is obviously tied up with what

we know regarding our specific job or career. For example, one's identity as a doctor or mechanic cannot be divorced from the knowledge which allows one to assume such titles.

These examples of family, community, and workplace can be contrasted with a domain in which the explicit integration of learning and identity is curiously absent. This domain is a place where, given its developmental agenda, one might well expect the integration of learning and identity to be of special importance. I am referring to schools. Identity-making in schools, while not completely disregarded, is typically partitioned from matters of cognitive growth. Public schools operate under an explicit mandate to nurture the intellect through teaching the sanctioned curriculum. Creation and re-creation of identity is also occurring, of course, but typically not as a socially marked feature of instruction, an aspect that we publicly acknowledge and announce. Officially, issues of identity development are *extra*-curricular, more properly a function of one's participation in sports, various clubs, informal "cliques," family, religion, and so on (Eckert, 1989; Shaw, 1994). [By "schools" I am referring to the majority of mainstream public education in the United States. Obviously, there are other types of schools, both in the United States and without, that are very explicit about their use of education as a means of ensuring that citizens' identities develop in ways consonant with prevailing political or religious ideologies.]

To some extent, the structure of school-learning presumes that students' identities are something that can be checked at the

door. We approach schools in a way which suggests that what is happening during the acquisition of knowledge is, and should be, something fundamentally separable from what is happening in those contexts in which we encourage students to develop as social, emotional, and moral beings.

Why this peculiar state of affairs? It is likely that much can be attributed to the fact that in schools, as in Western culture generally, we are immersed in a particular folk theoretical view of mind (Bruner, 1996).[1] In this folk view, the partitioning of learning and identity follows from the presumption that, within the person, processes of learning (considered cognitive in essence) are distinct from processes of identity (considered social or emotional in essence). From this perspective, there *is* no logical necessity for considering identity in relation to the cognitive acquisition of knowledge. Instead, identity becomes a matter of social and emotional development, important but not a socially marked function of classroom learning.[2] The bifurcation of learning and identity thus reflects our everyday theories of mind rather than some actual deeper truth regarding it. School-based discourse in most academic settings supports this bifurcation by seeking to enculturate one into the practices of abstract, rational discourse (Wells, 1994). The role of such discourse in enculturating students into the more subjective, personal, emotionally or ideologically influenced dimensions of school-based learning is less explicit.

An alternative view. It is important to keep in mind that *identity* and *learning* are constructs. This means, of course, that there are as many definitions for these terms as there are theories about them. So it is important that I make my own leanings explicit.

In matters of learning and identity, academic psychology has historically favored a research paradigm modeled after the natural sciences (Danziger, 1990), one consonant with the dualism of a folk theoretical view. This is natural since, like all of us, scientists swim in the medium of society and are subject to its most pervasive assumptions (Scarr, 1985, p. 501).[3] A culturally sensitive psychology, however, is one which strives to foreground the cooperation of science and imagination (Cole, 1996). It acknowledges that the world does not come to us precut into neat ontological slices, each happening to correspond to a particular human discipline. Instead, cultural psychology argues that because learning and identity are both mediated through cultural artifacts, our understanding of these phenomena must go beyond merely psychological or sociological accounts. Otherwise, we continue our division of labor along arbitrary disciplinary lines, the data of researchers in one discipline usually uncompelling to those in another.[4]

Having said this, in my mind the essential aspect of learning in schools is one's enculturation into the categories, symbols, social practices, and story lines, of a particular culture at a particular time and place. However one wishes to conceptualize it, in school-learning we accomplish two things, neither of which

can be divorced from the other. One, we construct an understanding of the artifacts (that is, the signs, symbols, practices, and beliefs) through which we constitute ourselves as intelligible members of society. Two, by virtue of this understanding (and in concert with the understandings of others), we act in ways that *identify* us, that is, that position us in social space relative to those around us (see Davies and Harre, 1990). We cannot separate learning how to *do* from learn how to *be*.

The important point for our purposes is that, since identity exists only as the present fit between self and context, an identity belong as much to context as to a self which appropriates them. Identity-making is therefore not reducible to a process of individual learning. Were identity simply a form of knowledge, you could attain mine and I could attain yours, including its unique aspects. Instead, an identity is a living event. Identity *is* the tension between one's position in space and time (by virtue of which I can say that I am a unique person) and one's shared position in cultural space (by virtue of which I can also say that I am a White American Male).[5]

Ultimately, it is always what we know or don't know *relative to others* that makes us intelligible as individuals. Learning in schools (or its absence) always positions us in social space relative to those who do or do not have similar abilities, values, and backgrounds. Identity is therefore a dialectic in the truest sense: an embodiment of two things which, although they appear to us to be in opposition (e.g., person and culture), actually constitute a unitary whole. Our job is to figure out how this is

so. We can contrast this with an interactional view, for example, in which identity and culture are presumed to constitute a duality, leaving us to explain how these essentially separate entities influence one another.

Dialectics are difficult things to talk about. Even veteran socioculturalists constantly fight the tendency to slip back into a conceptual comfort-zone by foregrounding either the person or the culture. For myself, working against this feels a bit like my experience of the popular Gestalt figure of a white vase against a black background, a figure that in the next moment appears equally interpretable as two opposing faces (see figure #1). A peculiar quality of this figure is that we find we can have only one of these perceptions at a time. Although we can shift quickly from one to another, we can experience either the vase or the faces but not both simultaneously. Similarly, across the human sciences, we tend to foreground either the individual or the context rather than engage the somewhat more ambiguous task of understanding this dialectic itself.

Looking at identity not as a psychological construct but as a coupling between individual and culture helps us to appreciate the fact that formal schooling makes demands which inevitably position students as being persons of one kind or another. For example, there are always those who are noticed for achieving or behaving well in school and those who are noticed for *not* doing so. Typically, however, we link both success and failure to some quality of the child, a quality which then begins to surface as a

prominent aspect of their identity. I would like to provide an example from the literature that illustrates this quite nicely.

An example. In the early 1960's, chronic difficulties in reading, writing, or math were beginning to be understood as symptoms of a possible "learning disorder" (LD). Our ways of talking about learning disorders quickly reified them into an entity, a cause by which we might explain the academic problems of not one child but of many children. In casual conversation, we attached "LD" to students as sometimes the most significant aspect of their identity (Valencia, 1997). For example, we might speak of a student as "an LD" in much the same way that we might identify a psychiatric patient as "a schizophrenic" or "a manic-depressive."[7] At this point, however, such terms no longer point to an entity but a stereotype, a cultural category that persons inhabit.[8] We have moved from LD as a presumably natural fact to LD as "social fact" (Mehan, 1993).

Ray McDermott (1993) has written an excellent chapter pointedly titled "The acquisition of a child by a learning disability." His title strikes us because it flips the expected figure-ground relation between handicap and context. It suggests that a learning disability is not an entity contained within a child but is something external to the child, almost with its own agency, which swallows him or her.

McDermott presents a case study of Adam, a third-grader formally diagnosed as LD. After 18 months of observing Adam's interactions in situations both in and out of school, a continuum seems to surface in which Adam's visibility as "a problem"

increases with an increase in the school-like nature of the cognitive demands placed on him." On one hand, there were everyday life situations (a trip to the zoo, for example). Here, McDermott writes that Adam "appeared in every way competent, and, more than most of the children, he could be wonderfully charming, particularly if there was a good story to tell" (p. 278). On the other end of the continuum, there were academic testing situations in which "Adam stood out from his peers not just by his dismal performance but by the wild guesswork he tried to do" (p. 279). For McDermott, each shift in context seemed to present a different Adam, a virtually different identity. It was only as situations became more school-like in their demands, in which "the quality of Adam's mind was increasingly at stake," that Adam assumed the classic appearance of a learning disorder.

Of course, one might say that Adam's problem becomes apparent in school simply because school makes demands on Adam's mind. In other words, school puts into stark relief something that was there all along, we just couldn't see it. McDermott challenges this by demonstrating that the notion of learning disorder fails to provide a meaningful explanation for Adam's behavior in situations outside a school-like context. Because Adam and LD can in fact be unhinged, the school itself is implicated as a necessary constituent of Adam's disorder. McDermott does not claim that there *are* no children who learn slower and with more difficulty than others, only that "without social arrangements for making something of differential rates of learning, there is no such thing as LD" (p. 272).

A risk of McDermott's account is that we may be tempted to interpret this as an offloading of Adam's LD onto the environment, as something "bestowed" on him that he passively absorbs.[10] Demonstrating the contextual features of personal attributes may in fact be a logical first step toward understanding identity as a dialectic. But our next step must then be to include an individual's private thoughts, personal qualities, and degree of personal agency as a constituent of this coupling.

Conclusions. Eisenhart writes that

> building or claiming an identity for self in a given context is what motivates an individual to become more expert; that by developing a sense of oneself as an actor in a context is what compels a person to desire and pursue increasing mastery of the skills, knowledge, and emotions associated with a particular social practice (Eisenhart, 1995, p. 4).

Learning and "developing a sense of oneself as an actor in a context" are not ontologically distinct endeavors. Learning constantly puts one's identity at risk through its on-going consequences for how one is socially positioned. In school, identity cannot be inoculated from the effects of demonstrating (or failing to demonstrate) that we have learned what we are expected to learn.

Failure to understand this dialectic may block us from asking interesting and important questions. In particular, what does it mean for identity-making to be an integral aspect of practices not formally marked as having anything to do with identity? What does it mean to be unconscious of the potency for identity-making in even the most humdrum classroom routines? In general, what this may mean is that we fail to appreciate the consequences of

what some have called the "hidden curriculum" (Giroux & Purpel, 1983), the function of schools in teaching us not only how to think but how to *feel* (Gover & Gavelek, 1997). In particular, it may mean that we need to become more sophisticated, more critical in our understanding of classrooms and their contents as *artifacts*. Since there are no universally given aspects to the objects, ideas, and practices we encounter in schools, only culturally patterned ways of going about them, we need to understand how educational artifacts mediate what Anne Dyson (1993) calls the "social work" of classrooms. As researchers, this means a new and more complex unit of analysis: the coupling between individual and culture (see Beach, 1995; Brown, 1992; Kindermann & Skinner, 1992). We need approaches such as McDermott's which begin to demagnetize conventional truths regarding the polarity of person and society.

To conclude, my point is not simply that learning has a social component and therefore implies issues of identity. In fact, such claims might suggest that one could understand learning better through partialing *out* its social factors. Instead, my intent has been to argue that there cannot be identity-free learning. Since learning (or the failure to learn) always positions us socially, students' construction of knowledge cannot be separated from their constructions of themselves as people (Lave, 1996).

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Endnotes

[1] Psychological theories of identity often regard cognition as basic to processes of identity (e.g., schema-theory, personal construct psychology, theories of self-concept, self-efficacy, etc.). From a sociocultural perspective, we might claim the reverse: that identity can be drawn on as a basic construct by which we might explain important aspects of cognition.

[2] Accordingly, those wishing to study identity-making in schools may target *extra*-curricular activities where students can follow their particular artistic, intellectual, and academic interests through clubs, competitive sports, and so forth (e.g., Eckert, 1989).

[3] Even Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory of identity development depends on the ontological separateness of ego and society.

[4] Michael Cole (1996) has resuscitated Wilhelm Wundt's original claim for two psychologies: one befitting the study of elementary psychological processes (e.g., sensory perception) and another appropriate to the study of higher psychological processes, especially those involving language and culture. While elementary psychological functions might yield themselves to a cause-and-effect analysis, Wundt regarded the methods of "causal psychology" ill-suited to the study of higher psychological process, for which he recommended approaches more akin to the descriptive sciences (e.g., ethnography, folk studies)(Cole, 1996).

[5] Some might argue that one's identity consists of parts (ethnic, gender, racial, sexual, etc.). While this may be helpful for purposes of analysis, it also risks a loss of understanding regarding the nature of identity as a whole (like attempts to describe the proverbial elephant by means of intermittent glances through a peephole).

[6] For example, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development foregrounds the interaction between nested environmental and human domains (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, a necessary first step is to identify the more-or-less stable *differences* between subsystems by which these are understood as being distinct. The construction of systemic or cybernetic principles in general presupposes the ontological separateness of its components (Bertalanffy, 1968).

[7] This practice seems to draw on a metonymic linguistic device (synecdoche) in which a part is used to refer to the whole (e.g., a nurse might refer to a patient as "The broken arm in room three").

[8] Presupposing the essence of an LD to be endogenous of course frees us from having to ask questions about how activities or talk within the larger system are organized to maintain the stereotype.

(continued)

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[9] Most of us are probably familiar with instances in which a diagnoses of learning disorder, attention-deficit, or hyperactivity has been made only after a child has entered the primary grades. Parents of such children are typically surprised and embarrassed by their apparent failure to have noticed something that, upon diagnosis, they must presume had been in their presence all along.

[10] Indeed, Gergen (1991) has argued that persons are somewhat like sponges, absorbing their identities from a sea of cultural flotsam and jetsam. But even sponges possess an intrinsic quality: the natural ability to absorb. From a sociocultural view, it is important to remember that what we take to *be* a sponge (its "identity," if you will) emerges only from the practical value of that quality to human actors. In a crisis, anything with some ability to absorb can quickly become a sponge (e.g., handkerchiefs, napkins, clothing, paper). Similarly, humans individuals have more-or-less natural and sometimes even unique qualities. But it is not these *per se* that identify us. What identifies both us and the quality is the meaning of these qualities at particular times and places. It is in the *coupling* of person and context that natural qualities become intelligible.

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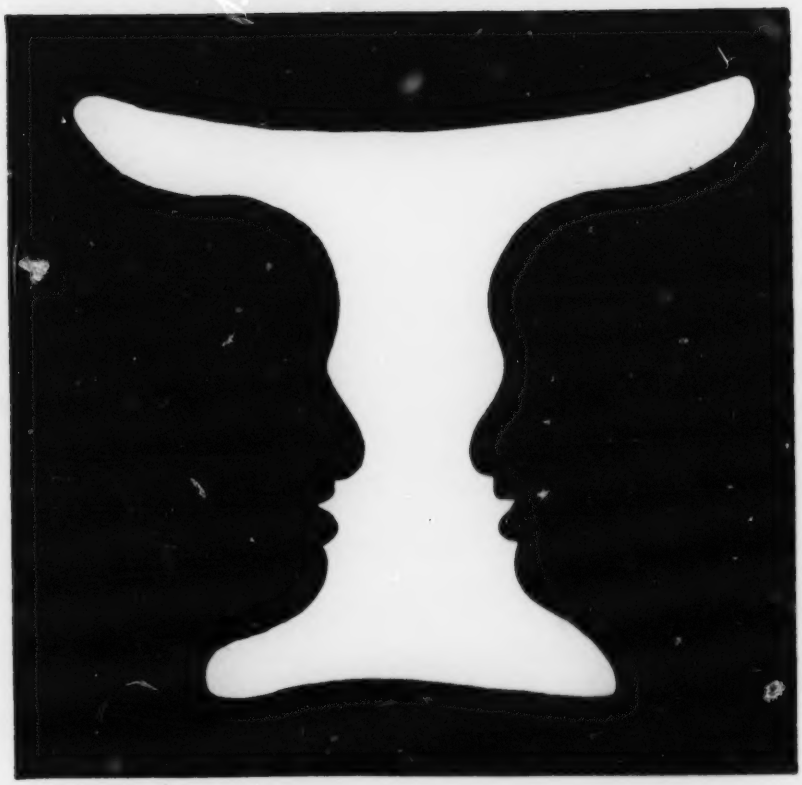
FIGURE #1



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